THE UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

ALERT

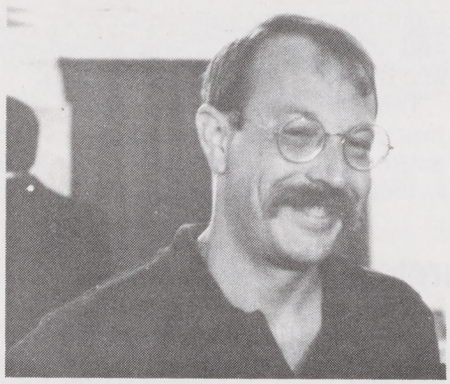
News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

July 1992

MCC San Francisco: "A Church of the HIV Culture"

"MCC San Francisco has changed from being a church of the Gay/Lesbian community to a church of the HIV culture," says the pastor, Rev. Jim Mitulski. "Much of the life of the church is organized around people being positive or negative for HIV. Everything now is HIV programming, even Board meetings. That's what it feels like."

The numbers at MCC San Francisco are overwhelming. Of 370 members, Mitulski estimates that there are 225 persons with HIV, two of whom are women. Mitulski reports two to five deaths a month from HIV within his congregation. And for the larger community, MCC San Francisco has performed at least one funeral a week since the early years of the crisis. "We've never had more than four funerals in a week, but there have been periods when we've had several weeks in a row with four funerals each week."



Rev. Jim Mitulski

When Rev. Mitulski became pastor of MCC San Francisco in May, 1986, the church was just going through the first wave of AIDS shock. Under Mitulski's leadership, the church began their HIV programming in the fall of '86 with a weekly prayer meeting. They started more HIV programming in '87, as men's programming events became the opportunity to talk about AIDS.

When the Rev. Ron Russell-Coons, having taken an early retirement because of his AIDS diagnosis, arrived in July of 1988, monthly healing services and support groups were already in place. Ron brought in a lot of outside attention through his Fellowship appointment to the National Council of Churches' Study Group on the Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community. MCC San Francisco became known as "The Church with AIDS," when Ron brought the National Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order to MCC San Francisco, and Ron preached his sermon, "We Have AIDS." The sermon was later published as Chapter One in *The Church With AIDS*, edited by Letty M. Russell. Ron took over the support groups from Jim as long as his health allowed.

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Troy Perry Reports on Clinton's AIDS Platform

The Rev. Elder Troy Perry, Founder and Moderator of the UFMCC, was in the audience when U.S. Democratic Presidential Candidate Bill Clinton made his historic campaign speech to the Lesbian and Gay community of Los Angeles on May 18. Clinton made promises to promote Gay and Lesbian rights, and outlined a platform on AIDS, which includes "dusting off" the U.S. National Commission on AIDS reports, and increasing funding for research and care.

Clinton was highly critical of the current administration's lack of response to the AIDS epidemic. "This administration ignores its own commission reports, underfunds research and treatment, leaves red tape binding science and drug trials and research, and says that behavior modification is the issue; but then, unlike Dr. Koop, refuses to embrace the cause of sex education in our schools which would give our children the chance to save their lives."

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Credit: AP/Wide World Photos

Skills Building Conference in October

The Annual U.S. National Skills Building Conference will be held this year in Washington D.C. on October 8-11 at the Sheraton Washington Hotel. The conference is sponsored each year by the AIDS National Interfaith Network (ANIN), the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA) and the National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC).

The theme for this year's conference is "RESULTS". Topics for workshops will include: Fundraising and Development, Access Program Planning and Evaluation, Automated Information and Communications Systems, Financial Management, General Management, Human Resources and Organizational Behavior Development. Repeating one of last year's most popular and effective plenary sessions, government and private funders will make presentations on fundraising specific to AIDS organizations, and will be available to answer questions from participants.

As one of the sponsoring organizations, ANIN is holding workshops on Fundraising for Interfaith Organizations, Spiritual Care and AIDS Service Organizations, Funding AIDS Ministries, Collaboration between AIDS Service Organaizations and the Religious Community, Working with Denominations as an AIDS Ministry, AIDS in the Latino Church, AIDS in the Black Church, and Spiritual Retreats for PLWA's.

This year, there are several Pre-Conference Institutes being planned. The Institutes currently scheduled will include Public Policy, Women and AIDS, AIDS in the African-American Religious Community, and AIDS Housing. The Institutes will be held on October 7th and will consist of all-day workshops and question and answer sessions.

The conference will be held in conjunction with the final display of the entire Names Project Quilt on the Mall in Washington from October 9-11. The last time the entire Quilt was seen by the public was in Washington in 1989. The conference schedule will be coordinated with the events surrounding the Quilt to allow participants to attend both events.

The conference will conclude with an Interfaith Memorial Service at the Washington National Cathedral. The Interfaith Service will be dedicated to those who have died from, and are living with, AIDS. The Rev. Larry Uhrig, Pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Washington, will speak as the witness in the "Personal Response to AIDS" section of the service. The MCC Washington DC choir will also be singing.

AIDS Ministries attending the service are encouraged to participate in the processional carrying a banner representing their organization. The banners should be 3 ft x 6 ft (the same size as a panel of the Quilt) and carried on a vertical pole.

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MCC San Francisco: "A Church of the HIV Culture" (cont'd from page 1)

By the end of the eighties, a majority of the congregation were persons with HIV.

These days, programs include four closed support groups for persons with HIV, a weekly open drop-in HIV support group, a support group for persons who are HIV negative, a bereavement group, a women's health support group, regular forums on specific topics, and a monthly worship service focusing on HIV. "That's the best attended service of the month," Mitulski states. "That service is the spiritual heart of the whole church. There's a lot of evangelical fervor; it's very spirited, with lots of emotion."

In addition to MCC's own HIV programming, the church is also used as a community center, and many groups, including Project Inform, Shanti, and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation have used church space for groups, forums and meetings.

When speaking of the church's HIV programming, Jim confesses, "One mistake we've made is that we've hired under-experienced people to direct HIV programming. That is, until we hired Rev. Jim Glyer, who has LOTS of experience! Unfortunately, with his recent health crisis, he will be cutting back to only one day a week, doing home and hospital visits. We're looking now to hire, on a half-time basis, a new HIV Program Coordinator. We're offering $18,000 a year, plus full health benefits. We have no one in mind. Anyone interested should send us their resume."

MCC San Francisco hires outside licensed therapists to assist the pastor in leading support groups. "This is much too big for us to deal with solely as a spiritual problem. We do better not to try. Combining their skills with ours is an important dimension of what we have learned."

MCC San Francisco has led the Fellowship in raising consciousness about the necessity of Disability Insurance for employees. Their own policy was set in place as a result of seeing what happened to Rev. Ron Russell-Coons in his pulpit prior to coming to San Francisco. They've never had to test their policy for an HIV+ employee, but Mitulski emphasizes that "long-term disability insurance is cheap. It's a bargain. There's no reason for any church with employees not to have it." The Board also has a goal of providing full health insurance coverage for all employees, full or part-time.

"Living with the demographic intensity of HIV in San Francisco is the reality: it's changed the culture." Rev. Mitulski asserts, "So much of this could be mitigated if greater attention were focused on it, not just by the government, but also on the denominational level. At times it feels like, in UFMCC, it's been 'too little, too late,' but it's never too late. This is a feeling of anger, which is not easily rationalized or explained. Aside from the obvious financial constraints, we in UFMCC are missing the boat. We have not dealt with AIDS simply by hiring Steve Pieters. When others in the Fellowship see the demographic intensity we have here, they'll understand.

"It feels like a time warp when I talk to others in the Fellowship. I'm amazed at the culture of silence around HIV in MCC's I've been in. The Church has the opportunity to set a standard where you can bring HIV out of the closet. The positive thing out of my anger is that I hope it pulls people forward. Talk about it; break it open," Mitulski advises. "We don't stint financially on what we do in HIV programming. Spend what it costs to do it well, and that money will come back to you. That is our experience. Do the best you can, and spend the money to do it."

Mitulski feels that the single most difficult challenge the Castro area church faces is to acknowledge and deal with grief every week. "We have

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First U.S. AIDS Discrimination Case Under A.D.A.

When Sal Fuentes cut his hand on a broken glass on Valentine's Day, 1992, his spouse dropped him off at the Urgent Care Center in Ventura, CA with his hand tightly wrapped in a towel. Dr. Thelma A. Reich refused to treat him due to his being HIV-positive. He asked her to put it in writing, and she wrote on a prescription pad, "This is to inform you that I do not treat patients with HIV in our clinic." Now he has brought a lawsuit against both the clinic and the doctor in what is believed to be the first AIDS discrimination case to be tried under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In an interview with ALERT, Fuentes, who is currently being treated for Cryptosporidium, elaborated on the story: "When I called them for directions, I told them I have AIDS, and

Salvador Fuentes

asked if that would be a problem. The response was, 'No, come on down.'" Sal started to fill out the clinic's questionnaire, when he noticed the receptionist giggling into the phone, "Would you like to come and tell him?" A doctor's assistant came and took him to a back room where the doctor refused him treatment. "I told her, 'I have nowhere to go. You realize this could lead to a lawsuit.' Without apologizing, she said, 'I don't treat patients with HIV or AIDS because it's not safe for my other patients.' I told her I wasn't leaving until she put it in writing. She doesn't seem to think she violated any law."

Sandy Pond of the Western Law Center for the Handicapped and Disabled and John Davidson of the American Civil Liberties Union took the case. In addition to violating the Americans with Disabilities Act, the clinic and the doctor are being sued in a Federal Court in Los Angeles for violating section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as well as violations of several sections of the California Civil Code. They are also be-

Take These Broken Wings and Learn to Fly

(by Steven D. Dietz and M. Jane Parker Hicks, M.D.)

(Second Edition: Tucson, AZ; Harbinger House, 1992, 1989)

Review by Rev. Steve Pieters

Take These Broken Wings and Learn to Fly: The Support Book for Patients, Family and Friends Living with AIDS is one of the best "support books" I have read. It is easy to read, practical, concise, and has an air of hopefulness and life.

The authors give plenty of room for people affected by HIV/AIDS to voice their experiences and feelings. They also give concrete advice on seeking personal fulfillment while living with HIV/AIDS, acquiring the mental discipline to decide to fight, making use of a person's full range of skills, and even bringing laughter and frivolity into the picture. This is one of the rare HIV support books which deals in a positive and realistic way with the role of faith and spirituality. The authors also offer realistic adivce on friends who don't call, friends who want to help, and preparing to get back to work.

The last thirty pages of the book provide an excellent glossary of HIV-related terms, and multiple resources for information and advocacy (including UFMCC), U.S. state health agencies and hotlines, publications, suggested reading, and medical references.

The authors are health care professionals in Tucson, AZ, who have been actively involved with the AIDS crisis since the beginning. They forthrightly offer hope, not for a cure, but for "an increased quality of life for those who face the challenge of living with AIDS." *Take These Broken Wings and Learn to Fly* will go to the head of my list of recommended reading for caregivers, family, friends, and those who are living with HIV/AIDS. ▼

Troy Perry Reports on Clinton's AIDS Platform (cont'd from page 1)

Rev. Elder Perry reports that Clinton called for a "Manhattan Project" for AIDS, which would put one person in charge of the federal government's response to AIDS. The Democratic candidate called for implementing the two Commission Reports on HIV/AIDS, and a national education campaign "to tell the American people, starting with our children, the hard truth and giving them a chance to save their lives..." Clinton also called for inclusion of women and people of color in drug trials, and full funding of the Ryan White Act.

Clinton promised "to make a major speech on AIDS to a non-traditional group of Americans who may not cheer at every word, but who need to hear the message." He also vowed that "someone who is HIV-positive and also has a positive attitude will come before the American people at the Democratic National Convention."

The candidate finished his speech by thanking "the gay and lesbian community for your courage and commitment and your service in the face of the terror of AIDS. When no one was offering a helping hand and when it was dark and lonely, you did not withdraw, but instead you reached out to others...If I could wave my arm for those of you who are HIV positive and make it go away tomorrow, I would do it, so help me God."

Rev. Elder Troy Perry was enthusiastic about the speech and the entire rally: "In all my years of meeting and talking with politicians, I have seen very few who would discuss Gay and Lesbian rights and AIDS in front of the television news cameras, especially if they were running for President. After listening to Mr. Clinton and watching him, I believe that he will do what he says if he becomes President. His is the most sweeping AIDS plan that I have seen from any presidential candidate."▼

Canada's AIDS Awareness Week: "No More Fear, No More Ignorance"

The Canadian AIDS Society has announced that the theme for the Second National AIDS Awareness Week is "No More Fear, No More Ignorance." AIDS Awareness Week in Canada is October 5-11, 1992. According to "Vancouver PWA," the newsletter of the Vancouver Persons with AIDS Society, the theme was chosen "because in many ways society seems to be retreating into a state of fear and ignorance in response to the AIDS epidemic." The newsletter article describes the result of fear and ignorance about HIV: recently in Canada, there have been numerous demands for mandatory testing of both patients and health care workers. In addition, the article states that "rather than recognizing that there should be mutual responsibility among those engaging in risk activities, more and more people with HIV have been taken to court in attempts to stop the spread of the virus."

The Canadian AIDS Society is a coalition of 71 community-based organizations serving the HIV population throughout Canada. Health and Welfare Canada provided initial funding for CAS in 1988 to develop national strategies in the fight against AIDS. ▼

AIDS Discrimination Case... (cont'd from pg 3)

ing charged with "intentional infliction of emotional distress," as well as "negligent infliction of emotional distress." The insurance company for both the clinic and the doctor has told them that the insurance company will not be held responsible for this. The clinic and doctor have already tried to settle out of court, but Fuentes and his lawyers did not accept the offer.

The emotional stress on Fuentes has been enormous. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about the doctor refusing me treatment, and the constant fear that someone will discriminate against me again, and I might lose my life. What happens if I'm in an auto accident and there's another doctor like Dr. Reich, and the doctor refuses to treat me?" Sal continued, "I was in the closet about having AIDS, but this angered me so much, I thought, 'What are we ashamed of? Nobody deserves this!'" He called ACT UP/LA and ACT UP/Santa Barbara, and together they held a demonstration against the clinic. The clinic, when they were tipped off to the planned demonstration and lawsuit, made a public apology and announced Dr. Reich's resignation. Nonetheless, the lawsuit and demonstration continued as planned.

Fuentes was so angered by the fact that he had to go outside of his community for help, that he started a chapter of ACT UP in Ventura County. "We've had a lot of response from throughout the county." Rev. Judy Dahl, pastor of MCC Ventura, reports, "Sal has become very much an AIDS activist."

Negotiations between Fuentes' lawyers, the clinic and the doctor are still under way, but Fuentes believes it will end up going to a jury trial. With polls of physicians around the country showing a sizable percentage who would not treat persons with HIV, this will be an important test case in securing the basic right of persons with HIV to medical treatment. ▼

Skills Building Conference... (cont'd from pg 2)

The banners will be placed in stands around the Cathedral to serve as a backdrop for the thirty-plus healing stations needed in the service. Your organization provides the banner and the pole, the Cathedral will provide the stand.

Scholarships will be offered to individuals who would like to attend the conference but lack sufficient financial resources. As in 1991, only those organizations that are dues-paying members of ANIN, NAPWA, or NMAC will qualify to apply for scholarships.

The Rev. Steve Pieters, an ANIN Board Member, says, "Because UFMCC AIDS Conferences have not received enough support to continue them, we are urging people from MCC to attend the National Skills Building Conference, not only for the vast amount of information and learning opportunities, but because this is an excellent opportunity to network with AIDS activists from around the country."

For more information on the conference, write to: National Skills Building Conference, 300 I St. NE, Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20002; fax #(202) 544-0378, or call (202) 544-1076. For information on the Healing Service at the Cathedral call ANIN at (202) 546-0807. ▼

MCC San Francisco:...(cont'd from pg 2)

open time in each of our worship services where individuals can give voice to their pain. That's very important here." Jim's feeling about the need for worship to be a safe space for grieving is summarized by a line from a favorite book, *Cancer in Two Voices*, written by Sondra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum, a lesbian couple facing cancer. The woman with cancer voices the feeling that there are 20 people in her life she might have sex with, but only two people she feels comfortable throwing up with. "This is a shift in her definition of intimacy," says Jim. "Similarily, we need to redefine what it means to be a community, to feel sick and be comforted and supported."

Mitulski said, "Where I experience God in all this is in the solidarity people have with each other, in the comfort we're able to give each other in worship, in support groups, and in prayer.

"I constantly pray for comfort and release from suffering, and for peace. The whole New Age stuff about learning from this I find as odious as fundamentalist theology on AIDS, saying that HIV is a punishment from God." But Jim believes it is important for him as a pastor to pray in solidarity with other people, and to pray for specific things, like a cure. "I can enter into solidarity with any prayer, and whatever I may think doesn't matter."

One man at a recent HIV Forum at the church told the group, "Having HIV is like being on spiritual fast forward." Mitulski feels this is true for the whole church: constantly dealing with questions of life and death, as well as the quality of life, has put MCC San Francisco on "spiritual fast forward." ▼

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